


OCCASIONAL PAPERS
ON THE HISTORY OF
BOSTON COLLEGE

BOSTON COLLEGE'S
BEACON HILL CONNECTION



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The smallest and oldest building on the Chestnut Hill campus of Boston College is the residence at 223 Beacon Street, tucked between Campion Hall and the Service Building entrance. Long tradition at Boston College has held that the house was built as a gate house by a previous owner of the property, Amos Lawrence, and that for its construction he had obtained stones from the famous Hancock House on Beacon Hill when it was dismantled. On the basis of this tradition the modest building at 223 Beacon Street has in recent decades been designated as Hancock House in official university directories and maps.

However, since no documentation is found in University records to substantiate the tradition, a bit of architectural sleuthing was undertaken. Frederick Detwiller,¹ architectural historian and Newton resident, became the University's proficient sleuth. Before presenting the results of Detwiller's research, it is appropriate to comment on the significance of Beacon Hill's Hancock House and the reasons why a connection between it and Boston College is worthy of the community's attention.

The Hancock House, which stood on the site of the west wing of the State House on Beacon Street, was built by Thomas Hancock, described in Winsor's *Memorial History of Boston*² as an opulent and public-spirited merchant, who first kept a bookstore, 'Stationers' Arms', and afterward dealt in general merchandise, acquired a fortune and became one of the leading commercial persons in New England. His residential property roughly embraced the land now bounded by Beacon, Mt. Vernon, Bowdoin, and Joy Streets,³ really most of Beacon Hill. In 1737 he began construction of a magnificent home, Boston's first stone residence,⁴ on a scale befitting his financial standing. The stone for the walls came from Braintree (now Quincy) but the artistic finish and the quoins and window caps were of Connecticut freestone from Thomas Johnson's quarry.⁵ Since it is the Connecticut stone that is pertinent to Boston College's Hancock House, detailed information about it is necessary.

In an article entitled "Notes on the Hancock House, Boston," that appeared in the January,

1927 issue of *Old-Time New England*⁶ Donald Millar cited an agreement found among the Thomas Hancock papers in the Boston Public Library which read in part:

Agreement between Mr. Thomas Hancock and Thomas Johnson of Middleton in the country of Hartford and colony of Connecticut in New England, stone-cutter to supply and Furnish the said Thomas Hancock with so much Connecticut stone as shall be sufficient to Beautify and build Four corners, One Large Front Door, Nine Front Windows and a Facie for the Front and back Part Over the Lower Story Windows of a certain Stone House which the said Thomas Hancock is about to Erect on a certain Piece of Land Situate near Beacon Hill in Boston aforesaid . . .

Johnson's agreement was in response to Hancock's detailed specifications which read as follows:

140 Stone for Quines for the 4 Corners of the house 20 Inch Long 8 high & 12 wide.

14 Stone for the Door 20 Inch Long 8 high.

12 Ditto about 12 Inch & 8 high.

5 Kee Stone for the tops of the Door of about two feet the Exact Dimensions to be given hereafter.

108 Stone 8 Inch high 6 wide for ye windows.

90 Ditto 10 Inch Long 8 high 6 wide for Ditto.

54 Kee Stone for the tops of nine windows the Exact Dimensions shall be given hereafter.

180 feet stone for a water table round the House.

72 feet for stools for ye windows & Door.

Your Humb: Ser

Thos. Hancock⁷

The significance of these stones in Boston College's attempt to establish a relationship of the cottage at 223 Beacon Street to the 1737 Hancock House will appear shortly. Thomas Hancock was as meticulous in dealing with London suppliers for the inside finishing of the house⁸ and once the house was completed he set about providing for natural beauty around it. The following excerpt from an order to a nurseryman in England shows Hancock's contentment with his new abode: "My Gardens all Lye on the South Side of a hill, with the most Beautiful Assent to the Top & it's Allowed on all hands

the Kingdom of England don't afford So Fine a Prospect as I have of Land and water. Neither do I intend to spare any Cost or Pains in making my Gardens Beautiful or Profitable . . .”⁹

Gilman attests that Hancock was not alone in his enthusiasm for his mansion. He writes: “. . . there seems to be little doubt that Hancock's doings on his fine estate created a great stir of admiration, and that the new stone house was thought to be a very grand and famous affair in the infant metropolis of New England, in the year 1737.”¹⁰

In 1927 Donald Millar gave a subtler reason for contemporary admiration of Thomas Hancock's house: “The Hancock House was the talk of the Colonies and influenced the architecture of the time in ways not easily understood in our age of photographs and varied architectural styles.”¹¹

Thomas Hancock died in 1764 and left his fortune and estate to his nephew and adopted son John, the revolutionary patriot and first governor of Massachusetts in the federal period. Thomas Hancock's wealth and ambition gave his house architectural splendor and uniqueness; John Hancock gave it a place in American history. The younger Hancock used his inherited wealth ostentatiously, but while one might have expected him, because of his position, to sympathize with the Tories, he was implacably anti-royalist. Winsor's *Memorial History* describes John Hancock's flamboyant lifestyle: “Among his own townsmen the rich Bostonian dearly loved to make himself of importance. ‘King Hancock’ was the sobriquet which he earned, and was a constant butt for Tory wits. In the *Pennsylvania Ledger* for March 11, 1778, ‘a gentleman from the eastward’ says: ‘John Hancock of Boston appears in public with all the pageantry and state of an Oriental prince; he rides in an elegant chariot . . . attended by four servants in superb livery, mounted on fine horses richly caparisoned . . .’”¹²

The same author in Winsor's *History* gave this summary impression, including a reference to Hancock's home: “Everything about him is picturesque from his bold handsome signature [first on the Declaration of Independence],

which gave him an assured immortality, to his fine house which appears in the pictures of the day as the 'Seat of His Excellency, John Hancock'. His position, wealth, and name made him valuable to the real movers of the Revolution, when men of his stamp were almost without exception on the side of the Crown; and it was this that made such a man as Sam Adams cling to and advance him . . ."13

The Hancock House became a center of revolutionary meetings. Washington was a visitor; Lafayette often lived there.¹⁴ During the dark days when Boston was occupied by the British and many of its buildings were razed and burned as firewood, General William Howe of the British Army took Hancock House as his headquarters, and legend has it that from a window of the principal chamber Howe's staff, using Thomas Hancock's old telescope, caught sight of the entrenchments thrown up by Washington overnight on Dorchester Heights, a sight that persuaded the British to evacuate Boston on March 17, 1776.¹⁵

Once the Republic was established, John Hancock spent all but two of the last thirteen years of his life (1780-1793) as governor of Massachusetts and Hancock House served as the governor's mansion. Two years after Hancock's death, Charles Bulfinch built his stunning State House on land formerly part of the Hancock estate, immediately to the east of Hancock House. In 1855 the Massachusetts Senate appointed a committee to negotiate the purchase of the Hancock homestead with a view to preserving it as a memorial but the negotiations fell through.¹⁶ In 1863, despite what was one of Boston's first preservation protests,¹⁷ Hancock House was torn down. Historian of Boston's architectural past, Jane Holtz Kay, quotes this somewhat sad description of the destruction of Thomas Hancock's proud mansion: "I . . . used to sit at the window of my play-room and watch the men slowly pry off one block of stone after another, for the masonry was so solid that it could be accomplished in no other way,' a character in the novel *The Chippendales* declared."¹⁸ Were some of those pried off blocks of stone destined to wind up on Amos Lawrence's and Boston College's property?

Some years later marble wings were added to Bulfinch's State House. The west wing was built on the land formerly occupied by Hancock House. The Commonwealth has placed a plaque on the west lawn of the State House which reads:

HERE STOOD THE RESIDENCE OF
JOHN HANCOCK:
A PROMINENT AND PATRIOTIC
MERCHANT OF BOSTON, THE FIRST
SIGNER OF THE DECLARATION OF
AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE, AND
FIRST GOVERNOR OF MASSACHUSETTS
UNDER THE STATE CONSTITUTION.

ERECTED 1737. REMOVED 1863.

Antiquarian and historical interest in Hancock House did not end with its dismantling. In 1893 Massachusetts built a replica of it at the Chicago Exposition.¹⁹ A permanent replica of Hancock House was built in Ticonderoga, New York (where it serves as a museum and library of the New York State Historical Association).²⁰ In his article "Notes on Hancock House, Boston" Donald Millar wrote: "Scattered about in museums, from Salem to Philadelphia, are carved capitals from its two principal rooms, balusters from its stairs, sections of stair rails etc. The writer of this article has for twelve years been collecting measurements of such bits of woodwork, descriptions of the house, illustrations, etc."²¹ The front door of the Hancock mansion is preserved by the Bostonian Society,²² and we are told the knocker from the front door was presented to Oliver Wendell Holmes, who put it on the door of his famous Cambridge house.²³ The front steps were transferred to Pine Bank, Jamaica Pond,²⁴ and the interior staircase found its way into a house in Manchester.²⁵ To these treasured relics of Thomas Hancock's grand Beacon Hill abode may now be added the corner stones or quoins of the small house at 223 Beacon Street. In his research at the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities Frederic Detwiller came across this letter²⁶ from Amos Lawrence's son, Bishop William Lawrence, to the vice-president of the above-named Society:

Jan. 15, 1917

Boston, January 14

Dear Mr. French:

When the Hancock House was being torn down my father was building a Lodge at the gate of his Farm which is now Boston College. He brought one or two loads of stone which he built into the Lodge. The corner trimmings I think — that is all.

If you drive out some day over Beacon Street by the Reservoir Pumping Station to the beginning of the Boston College grounds you will see the Lodge on the right standing close to Beacon Street.

The interior is of no interest.

Yours sincerely,

Wm. Lawrence

A similar confirmation, possibly based on the Lawrence letter, is found in an unpublished manuscript at the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester.²⁷ It is written by a Boston architect, Henry Ayling Phillips, about 1920 according to Detwiller, and is titled "The Hancock House . . ." In it Phillips wrote: ". . . for some of the quoins see the small gate lodge at the southeast corner of the Boston College grounds, on Beacon Street adjacent to the Chestnut Hill Reservoir park."

Frederick Detwiller has examined Boston College's Hancock House and after careful measurement concluded that the stones at the corners of the house are the same as those ordered 245 years ago by Thomas Hancock from Thomas Johnson in Connecticut: "108 Stone 8 Inch high 6 wide for ye windows — 90 Ditto 10 Inch Long 8 high 6 wide for Ditto." (Complete order cited above.) Detwiller says that some quoins are rough and may have been larger corner stones cut down to the smaller size, and he concludes: ". . . I would certainly be willing to have my judgment cited attesting to the authenticity of the Hancock-Lawrence freestone quoins."²⁸ So the long oral tradition at Boston College is validated.

By a happy coincidence Amos Lawrence was building his lodge in 1863, on the future site of Boston College, the same year Father John McElroy obtained a charter for the College.

Our Hancock House thus precisely spans the life of the University, and it also relates Boston College in a remarkable way to some of the memorable early days of Boston and Beacon Hill.

Hancock House may be the smallest but it surely is the most venerable structure on the Boston College campus. Its significance deserves notice in bronze.

NOTES

¹Frederic C. Detwiller graduated from Princeton University with a bachelor's degree in Architecture. At Columbia University School of Architecture he did graduate study in the Program in Restoration and Preservation of Historic Architecture. He has served as architectural historian of the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities and is currently writing a book tentatively titled *Boston's Other Revolution: "Architecture, Engineering, and Planning, 1750-1800"*, which will include a consideration of Hancock House.

²Justin Winsor, ed., *The Memorial History of Boston* (Boston: Ticknor and Son, 1881), Vol. II, p. 434. Also Arthur Gilman, "The Hancock House and Its Founder," *The Atlantic Monthly*, 2 (June 1863), 695.

³W. T. Baxter, *The House of Hancock* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1945), p. 76.

⁴Douglass Shand Tucci, *Built in Boston* (Boston: New York Graphic Society, 1978), p. 3.

⁵Walter Kendall Watkins, "The Hancock House and Its Builder," *Old-Time New England*, 17 (July 1926), 8, 10.

⁶Donald Millar, "Notes on the Hancock House, Boston," *Old-Time New England*, 17 (July 1927), 121.

⁷Watkins, p. 10.

⁸Millar, p. 122.

⁹Gilman, p. 700.

¹⁰Gilman, p. 692.

¹¹Millar, p. 124.

¹²Winsor, Vol. III, p. 171.

¹³Winsor, p. 201.

¹⁴Gilman, p. 707.

¹⁵Herbert S. Allan, *John Hancock* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1948), p. 29. Also Gilman, p. 707.

¹⁶Allan, pp. 396-7.

¹⁷Jane Holtz Kay, *Lost Boston* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980), p. 56.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁹Baxter, p. 77.

²⁰Allan, p. 397.

²¹Millar, p. 121.

²²Baxter, p. 77.

²³Winsor, p. 202.

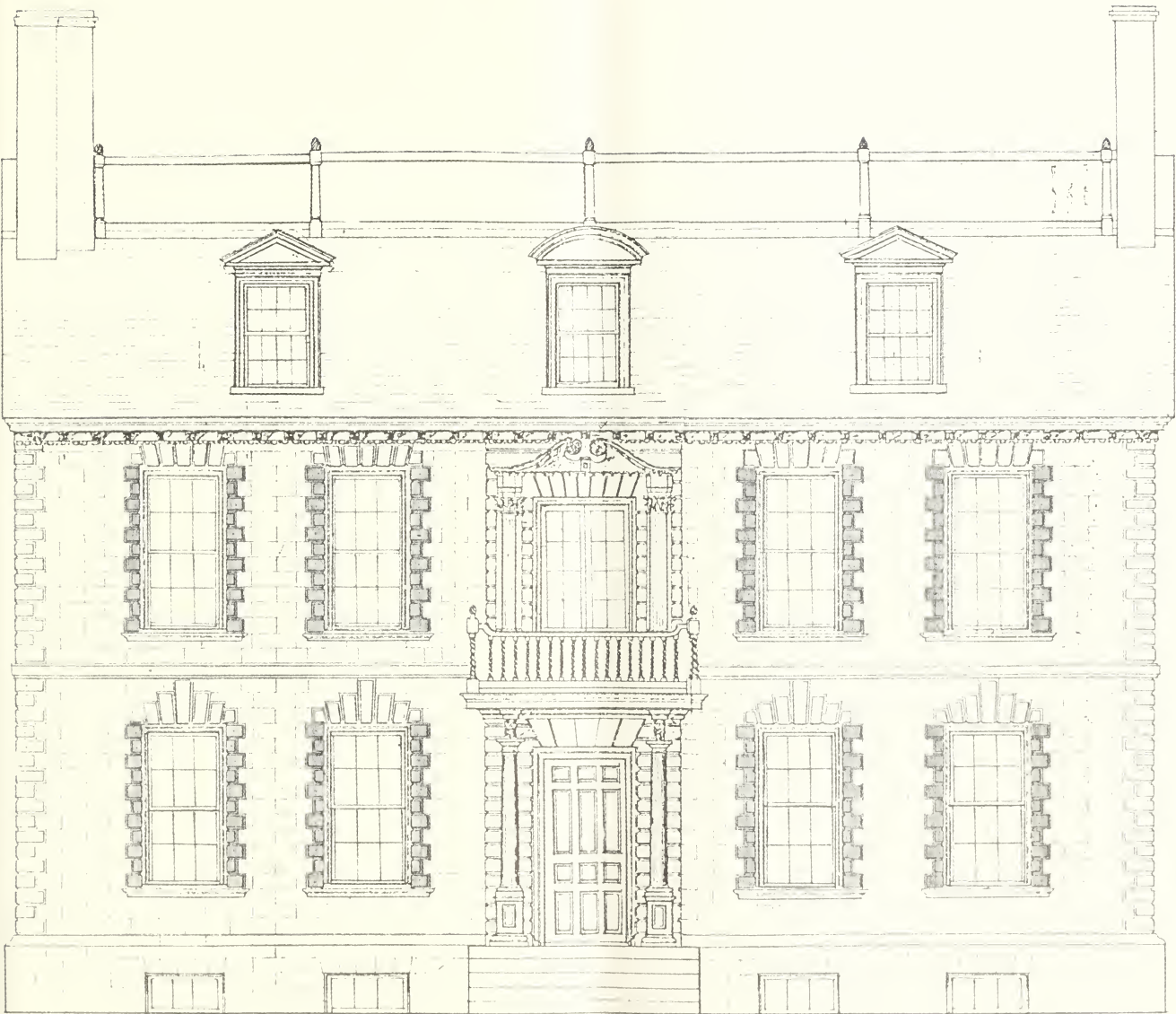
²⁴Frederic C. Detwiller, letter to the author September 15, 1981. Boston College Archives.

²⁵Watkins, p. 16.

²⁶Detwiller, letter to the author October 20, 1981. Boston College Archives.

²⁷Detwiller, September 15, 1981 letter.

²⁸Detwiller, October 20, 1981 letter. Attached drawings by Frederic Detwiller show the stone quoins (shaded) of Boston College's Hancock House and the parts of the original Hancock House from which they were taken.

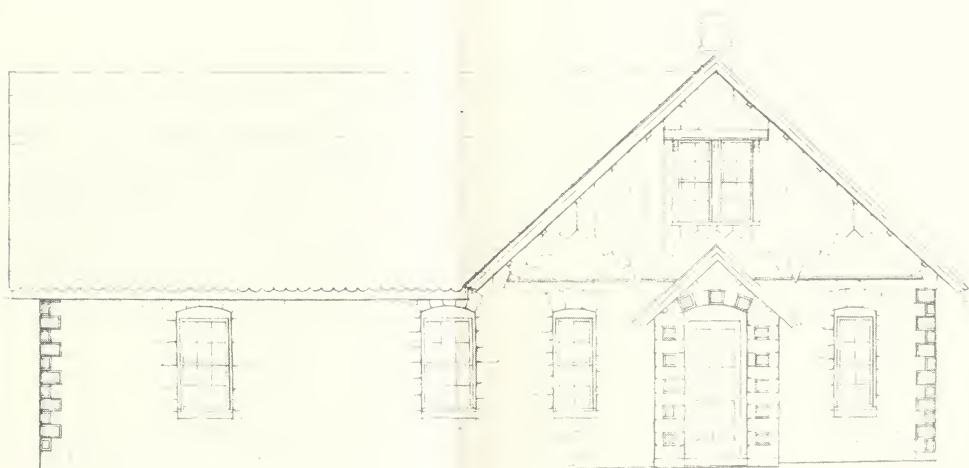


F.C. DETYLLER AFTER STURGIS 8/12/82

HANCOCK HOUSE

SCALE 1" = 10' FT.





AND. LAWRENCE JAMES

ROMA. OFFICE OF THE ARCHITECT

